

An A – Z of Concept Stretchers

Concepts are the foundations of thinking. Matthew Lipman described them as the ‘vehicles of thought’ (Lipman, 2003) and John Hattie remarked that one of the 3 key factors in student achievement is that children be encouraged to ‘re-conceptualise information’ so that they better understand it (Hattie, 1999)

The following is an alphabetical list of concepts that you may be able to ‘stretch’ or to challenge your students to think about some more. They are just sample of the library of concept stretchers that you can find on the subscription site, www.p4c.com

For each concept, perhaps the best starting point is to ask a ‘what is?’ question. What is an animal, what is bullying, and so on. When the students respond then challenge them some more, either by questioning their assumptions, testing their conclusions or asking one of the suggested questions below.

This works even with very young children, from the age of 4 onwards. Here’s an example focussing on the concept of telling lies:

Set up

- Tell an outrageous lie, for example “*My name is Sam and I’m a hairy gruffalo*” but say it with a smile on your face
- When the children say that’s not true, ask the following:

Teacher responses

- How can you tell if someone is telling a lie? (children normally say, ‘*because they smile when they talk*’)
- So if I smile whilst I’m talking, am I lying? For example ... say something that is very obviously true but with a smile on your face
- What about if I frown, does that mean I’m telling the truth? For example ... say something that is very obviously false but with a smile on your face

Further Questions

- Is it always wrong to tell lies? (even if it’s to avoid hurting their feelings?)
- If I pretend to be a rabbit, am I telling lies?
- If you tell your mother that you haven’t bought her a present when you have, is that lying?
- Is it lying to say there is a tooth fairy? (for older children only!)

The A to Z list

Animal

If I have warm blood in my veins and fur on my back, then am I an animal?

What’s the difference between an animal and a human?

What is meant by the phrase, “he was exhibiting animal behaviour”?

What differences are there between zoo, pet, domestic, farm and wild animals?

Bullying

If I hit someone then am I a bully? (even if I hit them during a game of football?)

If someone makes me feel bad, are they bullying me? (even if they tell me my cat has died?)

Is it always wrong to bully someone? (what about bullying them into giving to charity)

Can someone bully you without being a bully?

Culture

Is it possible for an individual to have his/her own culture?

How many different cultures do we belong to at one time?

Do animals have cultures?

Bill was born in this town. His mother is Japanese and his father is Dutch. What culture does he belong to?

Dreams

Is dreaming the same as thinking?

Do you have to close your eyes to dream?

Are you the same person in your dreams as you are when you're awake?

How do we know that our whole lives are not dreams?

Exist

Does everything that we can think of, exist?

Do flames exist?

Does the cold exist?

When someone dies, do they cease to exist?

Friends

What are friends?

Do you always have to be nice to your friends?

If a friend won't share their sweets, does that mean they're no longer your friend?

How do you know that someone is your friend?

Growth

What is growth?

How many examples can you think of things that grow without changing?

In what way could a person grow without changing?

Is growth a good or bad thing?

Home

Does everything have a home?

Do wind and rain have a home?

If a bird's nest is in a tree, does that mean the tree is the bird's home?

What's the difference between a house and a home?

Ideas

Are ideas the same as thoughts?

What does someone mean when they say they 'have no idea'?

What does 'idea' mean in the phrase, 'my idea of good music is different to yours'?

At what age do people have their first idea?

Justice

Is justice always fair?

How are justice and revenge linked?

Is there a difference between natural justice and human justice?

Does everyone deserve justice?

Knowledge

Can you have the same knowledge about something as someone else does?

If I have toothache, can you know how it feels?

What's the difference between knowing your address and knowing your home?

Do you have more knowledge about your teeth than your dentist does?

Like

What is the difference between like and love?

What do each of the uses of 'like' mean in the phrase, 'I like lots of things, like chocolate'?

What do each of the uses of 'like' mean in the phrase, 'like mother, like daughter'?

What is the opposite of like?

Mind

Is your mind inside, outside or the same as your brain?

Do all your thoughts take place in your mind?

When you talk to yourself, is that you talking or your mind talking?

What does mind mean in 'mind your own business,' 'I have a lot on my mind' and 'don't mind me'?

Names

If you had a different name, would you be a different person?

Why do things need names?

How many examples of 'names for things people do' can you think of?

Is 'horse' also the name of a horse?

Original

If I make up a story, does that mean it's an original?

When you have an idea for the first time, does that make it original?

Are your memories copies of an original experience?

What's the difference between originals and copies?

Poem

Can a single sentence be a poem?

When can a song be a poem?

Can silence be a poem?

If a poem has never been written down or shared, is it still a poem?

Questions

Why do we ask questions?

What would life be like if you could never ask questions?

Do you ever ask a question, but not expect an answer? Why/when?

What's one of the best questions you've ever asked?

Real

What does real mean?

Is real the opposite of fake?

Are dreams real?

What's the difference between a real banana and a plastic banana?

Shape

Does everything have a shape?

What shape are your dreams?

Does every shape have a name?

Is there such a thing as the 'perfect' shape?

Thoughts

Do your thoughts control everything you do?

Can two people have exactly the same thoughts?

Are thoughts real or imaginary or something else?

What's the difference between thoughts and ideas?

Understanding

Can a person know something without understanding it?

Can a person comprehend something without understanding it?

Are there things you do without understanding how you manage to do them?

Are you responsible for obeying a rule if you don't understand the rule?

Virtues

Is competitiveness a virtue?

Is helpfulness a virtue?

Is the absence of a vice a virtue?

Can a personality trait be both a virtue and a vice (eg ambition)?

Worth

How can we tell what a loaf of bread is worth?

How can we tell what a pet is worth?

What is the air worth?

If something is worth a lot, does that mean it's expensive?

Xenophobia

Why are people scared of what they don't know?

Can it be a good thing to be scared of the unknown?

Is it xenophobic to say you are scared of terrorists?

Is it natural to be xenophobic?

You

What makes you, you?

Is there only one or you?

When you play make-believe, are you still you?

Would you still be you if you had different parents?

Zoos

Between them, do all the zoos in the world have examples of all the animals in the world?

Why aren't dogs and bunny rabbits kept in zoos?

Is it better for animals to be in a zoo or in a natural habitat?

Should we teach zoo animals things?